Coast District Attorney Reported Investigating Incidents Involving Ship Used to Raise Soviet Submarine

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WASHINGTON, June 17—Philip Watson, the Los Angeles County assessor, said today that the district attorney's office there was investigating the identities of two men who purported to represent the Central Intelligence Agency during a highly sensitive meeting with the assessor last January.

Mr. Watson said that Joseph Busch, the district attorney, was also looking, at Mr. Watson's request, into whether there had been any intent to defraud his office by either of the two. The assessor said that the man had informed him during the meeting that a deep-sea mining ship ostensibly owned by Howard R. Hughes, the billionaire, was in reality the property of the C.I.A.

Mr. Watson is embroiled with the Summa Corporation, Mr. Hughes's holding company, in a tax dispute over the ownership of the vessel, which was used by the C.I.A. last summer to raise part of a sunken Soviet submarine from the floor of the Pacific ocean near Hawaii.

A subsidiary focus of the investigation, county officials said today, will be the question of whether the vessel, the Glomar Explorer, is owned by the Summa Corporation or the United States Government, neither of which, Mr. Watson has said, has thus far been willing to claim title to it.

Phone Call From C.I.A

According to accounts pieced together from a number of government officials, the genesis of the problem that criminal investigators have now been called in to sort out occurred one day last January, when a supervisor in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Los Angeles field office received what seemed to be an unexceptional telephone call from the local station of the C.I.A.

Would it be possible, the caller wondered, for someone from the bureau to introduce four C.I.A. employes to Mr. Watson, with whom the agency had an urgent matter of national importance to discuss?

The F.B.I. supervisor, who was preoccupied with the investigation of a bizarre burglary the previous summer at a Hollywood office owned by Mr. Hughes, assigned one of the agents working on the case to perform the requested favor and thought no more about it.

But from that apparently innocuous telephone call has stemmed a bewildering set of circumstances that makes it appear more and more as if Mr. Hughes and not the Federal Government may be the owner of the Glomar Explorer.

Although neither the F.B.I. nor the C.I.A. will talk for the record about the meeting with Mr. Watson or the arrangements that preceded it, some government officials with knowledge of the matter have indicated their their belief that the bureau, which carried out the introduction in good faith, was taken advantage of by the agency.

For it now appears that the four men who met with Mr. Watson on Jan. 31 to assure him in confidence that the Glomar Explorer was owned by the Federal Government, and therefore exempt from local taxes, represented not the C.I.A. but Mr. Hughes and the Global Marine Corporation, the subcontractor that designed and built the ship.

Big Profit Suggested

The assertion by a high Federal official that it was the C.I.A. that initiated the meeting raises the question of whether the agency itself will be implicated in any criminal fraud case that might be developed by Mr. Busch's investigators involving representations by two of the four men of either their C.I.A. connections or of the Explorer's true ownership.

The agency's use of the Explorer to recover part of the submarine became publicly known last March.

Since then officials of both the C.I.A. and the Summa Corporation, Mr. Hughes's umbrella organization, have insisted that previous descriptions of the ship as a deep-sea mining vessel owned by Mr. Hughes were a specious "cover story" intended to disguise its true nature and purpose.

Several Government officials have said that trust agreements exist that make the ship's Federal ownership clear, but they have repeatedly declined to show such agreements to reporters.

The Explorer, which is valued at upwards of $300-million, was by all accounts built with Federal funds. If her title was surreptitiously passed to Mr. Hughes, questions are raised about possible windfall profits reaped by him and his compliance with certain Federal regulation, as well as his liability for state and local taxes in California.

The four men who went to Mr. Watson's office in January to discuss the tax question have subsequently been identified as David Brice Toy, Steven T. Schoenbaum and George Kucera, all of Los Angeles, and Clinton Morse of Houston.

In a recent interview, Mr. Watson recalled that the F.B.I. agent, before departing, told him that "these gentlemen are from the C.I.A. and they want to talk to you on a matter of national security.

Federal officials would not name the agent involved, but they said that he was not William Sullivan, the head of the bureau's Los Angeles office. The Times reported last month that it was Mr. Sullivan, who announced his retirement last week, who had made the introduction.

Mr. Toy, a lawyer who repre- Watson said, but both Mr. Morse, an attorney for the Summa Corporation, remained silent during the meeting, Mr. Watson said, but both Mr. Kucera and Mr. Schoenbaum, who made the assertions of the Explorer's Federal ownership, identified themselves during the conversation as C.I.A. employes.

Mr. Toy and Mr. Morse, who have declined to discuss the January meeting, have both said that they have never had any connection with the agency.

Mr. Kucera said in a recent telephone interview that although he had once been a C.I.A., agent he was now employed by the Summa Corporation. Mr. Schoenbaum, reached in his office at Summa's Encino, Calif., headquarters, declined to confirm or deny his association but a well-placed source said of Mr. Schoenbaum last week, "he's a Summa Man."

C.I.A. Letter Requested

A spokesman for the C.I.A. declined to comment when asked why a member of his agency's Los Angeles office had arranged the interview, or whether Mr. Kucera or Mr. Schoenbaum had any overt or covert connection with the agency.

Mr. Watson said he told the men that he would be willing to waive county property taxes on the Explorer, which was then berthed in Long Beach following her mid-1974 attempt to raise the Soviet submarine, if they would provide him with a letter from the C.I.A. stating the Government's ownership.

The visitors declined on security grounds to provide such a letter, and Mr. Watson has since sent the Summa Corporation a tax bill that will come due in August for $7.5-million. The assessor added that he had made a second request of Mr. Toy for such a letter in April, but that none had been forthcoming.

The tax bill includes a 25 per cent fraud penalty assessed after Mr. Watson said he learned a week ago that the Explorer had been registered in Long Beach in October, 1973.

The Summa corporation has consistently declined to make a formal declaration of government ownership of the ship to Mr. Watson, but has instead parried his tax levies with the argument that because the ship is registered under Summa's name in Delaware it does not "have a tax status in Los Angeles County."

The investigation by Mr. Busch's office, sources said, is aimed at determining whether any fraud was committed in connection with the representations by Mr. Schoenbaum and Mr Kucera that they were C.I.A. employes and that the Summa Corporation was the ship's legal owner.

In addition, Federal statute make it a crime to impersonate a Federal official, but government officials said, as far as they knew, the F.B.I. was conducting no investigation of the incident.

Meanwhile, the future status of the Glomar Explorer remained uncertain in another sense. Last summer, the vessel attempted to bring up from the Pacific Ocean floor a Soviet submarine that sank 700 miles northwest of Hawaii in 1968. Part of the submarine was recovered but the rest sank again.